

# HOW EGALITARIAN WAS ANCIENT INDIAN BUDDHISM?

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Egalitarianism is a philosophy which believes that all people are equally important and should have the same rights and opportunities in life. This type of equitable treatment is not affected by a person's caste, class, or gender. In this paper an attempt is made to evaluate the views of the Buddha in particular and that of the Buddhist Saṃgha in general on both caste system and women. An effort shall also be made to see if ancient Indian Buddhism could not draw rural masses into its fold due to its urban orientation.

By the beginning of the age of the Buddha, caste system with its gross inequalities had become well-established in the Indian society. It had become both functional and hereditary. The Buddha's main argument against the caste-based discrimination was that no man could be superior or inferior in society merely by reason of his birth in a particular caste. He clearly pointed out that the position of man depended on his conduct. This meant that it was a person's attitude and behaviour (*kamma*) which made that person superior or inferior. Despite the immense popularity which his teaching enjoyed in Indian society, the Buddha seems to have met very strong opposition from the brāhmaṇas in disseminating his teaching. The Buddhist *suttas* record some interesting discussions which the Buddha had with some of the well-known brāhmaṇas of his day. The *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* is one of the more important discourses in this respect.<sup>1</sup> In this *sutta* the Buddha points out that the outward behaviour of a person who is morally superior, is a result of that person's inward knowledge and it is this kind of person that the Buddha described as being endowed with true knowledge and conduct (*vijjācaraṇa*) and thus, the best both among men and gods.<sup>2</sup> In this *sutta*, the Buddha's message clearly implied that the righteous life leading to Nibbāna is independent of caste distinctions.

In the *Madhura Sutta* attributed to *thera* Mahākaccāna, it has been pointed out that birth-based caste-superiority can be defeated by economic superiority.<sup>3</sup> If one has wealth, whether one be a sudda, one can obtain the services even of a brāhmaṇa. The king of Madhurā, to whom the discourse was addressed, is made to admit that in this respect there is no difference among the four castes as claimed by the brāhmaṇas. And, in fact, the profession of brāhmaṇas was not only that of priest; there were those who earned their livelihood even as butchers and carriers of corpses which were normally confined to suddas in the laws drawn up by the brāhmaṇas themselves.<sup>4</sup> This shows that the brāhmaṇas could not maintain their so-called superiority by birth in society, although they preached it in theory. Under such circumstances, it is natural that the claim of the brāhmaṇas that they are the highest caste is referred to by the Buddhists as a propagandist cry.<sup>5</sup> It is only moral superiority that can stand against secular temptation. The next point raised by Kaccāna is an ethical one, in that he makes the king admit that in the retribution of *kamma*, both in reward and in punishment, there is no caste difference. Moral and spiritual development is not a special privilege acquired through birth in a particular caste, but is open to all. The Buddha taught that all men, irrespective of caste, are equal before moral law. The *Assalāyana Sutta* of

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<sup>1</sup>*The Dīgha Nikāya*, eds. T.W. Rhys Davids & J.E. Carpenter, London: PTS, 1890-1911 (henceforth D).I.87ff.

<sup>2</sup>D.I.99.

<sup>3</sup>*The Majjhima Nikāya*, eds. V. Trenckner & R. Chalmers, London: PTS, 1888-1896 (henceforth M).II.83-90.

<sup>4</sup>*The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1973 (henceforth SBE).XXV.150-168.

<sup>5</sup>*ghoso yeva eso lokasmin.*

the *Majjhima Nikāya*<sup>6</sup> is another discourse that contains some arguments against the social attitude of the brāhmaṇas. Here the brāhmaṇas seem to have been offended by the Buddha's statement that all the four castes had the ability to practice virtue and achieve purity (*caturvaṇṇiṃ suddhiṃ*). Here, the Buddha pointed out that fire kindled with a piece of sandal wood by a man of so-called high birth serves the purpose of fire just as it would serve if kindled with the branch of the castor oil shrub by a man belonging to a low caste. Irrespective of the source, the fire is the same, and in the same way whatever be the caste of a man by birth, he can have the ability for self-development to the highest degree. Any division whether it be social, economic, intellectual or racial, is an obstacle for the realization of the spiritual unity of mankind. Well-known brāhmaṇas are very often mentioned as pure by birth back to seven generations on both their father's and mother's side.<sup>7</sup> This question is taken up towards the end of the *Assalāyana Sutta* where the seer Asita Devala questions seven brāhmaṇas, who made that claim, whether they can be sure of the fact their mothers and grandmothers, back through seven generations, never committed adultery. The same question is put with regard to their forefathers and to both questions the brāhmaṇas have to reply that they cannot be sure on this point. These questions are followed by a more interesting question, where the brāhmaṇas are asked whether they know the caste of the *gandhabba*, the spirit that takes conception in the womb of the mother. Ultimately, the irony that is found in the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* recurs here when these caste conscious brāhmaṇas are made to admit that they do not know who they are.<sup>8</sup>

In another *sutta*, the Buddha points out that the divisions imposed on society by the brāhmaṇa are quite arbitrary and are not conducive to the good of the individual or of society.<sup>9</sup> Giving his own alternative, the Buddha says that all the four castes alike, can practise the pure life which is the true service (personal as well as public) and follow the Dhamma, which is the true wealth (spiritual as well as material). Here the Buddha never forgets the practical side of social life as he points out that whatever be the work that one does, it should be done skilfully. Otherwise, one cannot do justice to one's work. Even if caste be regarded on the basis of occupation, only a clever person can do the job well. And when one does one's job well, one will grow in the five forms of noble (*ariya*) growth, viz., faith, morality, learning, renunciation, and wisdom. From the Buddhist point of view there is no reason whatsoever for one class of people to be hereditary rulers and masters over another class regarded as slaves and inferiors by birth. From the Buddhist point of view, the work one does has no genetical significance and everyone has the ability to rise to the highest position in society if one has the will and the ability to do so. It is in accordance with this doctrine that the Buddha threw open the doors of his Saṃgha to everyone alike, irrespective of caste by birth. He pointed out that just as the great rivers like the Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Aciravatī, Sarabhū, and Māhī lose their separate identities once they join the ocean, even so do the four castes lose their former names and origins once they become members of the Saṃgha.<sup>10</sup> The truth of his theory was amply proved when even the most base-born were able to become eminent members of his Saṃgha.

The Buddha stressed the fact that biologically man is of one species and thus any distinction based on birth goes against the biological unity of mankind. This scientific truth has been very well expressed in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* of the *Sutta-Nipāta*.<sup>11</sup> The *sutta* opens with a discussion between two brāhmaṇas as to whether one becomes a brāhmaṇa by birth (*jāti*) or by conduct (*kamma*). Unable to decide the matter for themselves, they visited the Buddha and asked him for a solution. The Buddha pointed out that among grass, trees, worms, moths, fishes, beasts, birds, etc. there are various types, whereas in the case of men

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<sup>6</sup>M.II.147ff.

<sup>7</sup>*The Aṅguttara Nikāya*, eds. R. Morris & E. Hardy, London: PTS, 1885-1900 (henceforth A).I.162; D.I.113, 121, 123.

<sup>8</sup>*evaṃ sane bho na mayaṃ jānāma keci mayaṃ homā'ti.*

<sup>9</sup>M.II.177ff.

<sup>10</sup>*The Vinaya Piṭakam*, ed. H. Oldenberg, London: PTS, 1879-1883 (henceforth Vin).II.239.

<sup>11</sup>*The Sutta-Nipāta*, eds. D. Andersen & H. Smith, reprint, London: PTS, 1984 (henceforth Sn).115ff.

they constitute only one.<sup>12</sup> Then the Buddha cites examples of how men are designated by different names according to their occupations. The Buddha pointed out that, whereas in the case of the plants and animal kingdoms there were many species and marks by which they could be distinguished, in the case of man there were no such species and no such marks.<sup>13</sup> As R. Chalmers says, “Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of the modern biologists, that the *anthropidae* are represented by the single genus and species, Man.”<sup>14</sup> According to the Buddha, the apparent divisions among men are not due to basic biological factors but are only conventional (*sāmañña*). The Buddha provides an evolutionary account of society and shows that the four-fold order arose from the division of functions in society.<sup>15</sup>

Though the Buddha is never known to have taught the excellence of caste system, yet his theory of *kamma* is seen as the most effective rationalisation of caste system. Buddhist tradition conceived cycles of birth and rebirth in individual terms and once the cycle was so conceived, one’s present position in a low caste was justified by virtue of the deeds in a previous existence and a higher one was promised if one performed the set obligations properly. Further more, nowhere do we come across a statement which is against the division of society into castes. As pointed out by Romila Thapar the Buddha made a distinction between the caste as the frame of the socioeconomic structure, which he accepted, and the notion of the relative purity inherent in the upper castes, which he rejected.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the value attached to upper caste birth and the privileges that went with upper caste birth does not appear to have been completely extinguished from the minds of the members of the Saṃgha. The fact that upper castes may have swamped the Saṃgha completely is hinted at by an incident related in the *Tittira Jātaka*.<sup>17</sup> Once when the Buddha put a question to the *bhikkhus* as to “who deserves to have the best quarters, the best water, the best food?” He received a reply from some: “He who was a khattiya before he became initiated,”<sup>18</sup> and from others: “He who was a brāhmaṇa or a gahapati.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, in the consciousness of the great majority of the *bhikkhus*, the caste distinction had value.<sup>20</sup> The Buddha also appears to have been extremely careful not to antagonise the established order and its guardians. For example, he disallowed the entry into his Saṃgha of all those who were in the royal service,<sup>21</sup> debtors,<sup>22</sup> slaves<sup>23</sup> and sons without the permission of their parents.<sup>24</sup> These were some of the questions which a person seeking ordination into the Buddhist Saṃgha was asked:<sup>25</sup>

“Are you a freeman?”

“Have you no debts? ”

“Are you not in the royal service?”

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<sup>12</sup>The biological unity of mankind as against genetical caste distinctions is further shown by the Buddha in the *Assalāyana Sutta* (M.II.154) where he argues that if by the union of a brāhmaṇa and a khattiya, a child were born, his offspring would remain a human being whereas if a he-ass and a mare were to mate the offspring would still be called a mule.

<sup>13</sup>M.II.196f; Sn.vv.600ff.

<sup>14</sup>R. Chalmers, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1994: 396.

<sup>15</sup>D.III.80ff.

<sup>16</sup>R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi: Sangam Publishers, 1978: 51-52.

<sup>17</sup>*The Jātaka*, ed. V. Fausböll, London: Trubner & Co, 1877-1897 (henceforth J).I.217.

<sup>18</sup>*khattiya kulā pabbajito*.

<sup>19</sup>*brāhmaṇakulā gahapatikulā pabbajito*.

<sup>20</sup>R. Fick, *Social Organization in North-East India in Buddha’s Time*, tr. S.K. Mitra, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920: 33.

<sup>21</sup>Vin.I.72-74.

<sup>22</sup>Vin.I.75-76.

<sup>23</sup>Vin.I.76.

<sup>24</sup>Vin.I.84; III.12ff.

<sup>25</sup>SBE.XIII.230.

“Have your parents given their permission?”

If the answer to any of these questions was in the negative, then that person was denied entry into Buddhist community.

The ambiguous use of the word ‘*brāhmaṇa*’ also appears to have led to some negative implications. There is no doubt that the Buddha was critical of the *brāhmaṇas* as far as their pretentiousness as a caste was concerned. However, Pāli literature holds the word ‘*brāhmaṇa*’ in high esteem implying a person of high moral character and insight. The very choice of this word as a title of honour, must have actually afforded a fresh strength to the veneration which the word inspired. Rhys Davids, in fact, goes on to say that “the very means they (Buddhists) adopted to lend weight to their doctrine of emancipation became a weapon to be used against them.”<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps because of such ambiguities that some scholars have gone to the extent of saying that “[t]here was in fact nothing substantial in the Buddhist clerical order which could ruin the entire caste system”<sup>27</sup> and that the Buddha was not a champion of the cause of lower classes, despite the fact that the Buddhist theory acknowledged the equal right of all males to be received in the *Samgha*.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it has been alleged that a marked leaning to aristocracy (of all the three varieties, birth, brain, and bullion) lingered in ancient Buddhism as an inheritance from the past.<sup>29</sup> M. Weber, too agreed with such a view and pointed out that as the members of the *Samgha* were predominantly recruited from the great noble families, the rich ‘burghers’, and the *brāhmaṇas* who were distinguished representatives of a ‘cultured laity,’ Buddhism had no tie with any social movement and as a whole was the product not of the underprivileged but of a very clearly privileged strata.<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, R. Fick stated that the development of caste was in no way broken or even retarded by Buddhism because its doctrine did not aim at a transformation of social conditions and it was taken for granted that they were unchangeable.<sup>31</sup> C. Eliot too did not see the Buddha as a social reformer and pointed out that although the Buddha denied the superiority of the *brāhmaṇas*, he did not preach against caste, partly because it existed only in rudimentary form at that time.<sup>32</sup> C. Bouglé also argued that though it cannot be denied that “the Buddhist community worked to undermine the *brāhmaṇa*’s clientele and the conflict of interests in undeniable,”<sup>33</sup> the Buddhists were far from “reconstructing the edifice of Hindu society according to new plans; if they worked at replacing the roof, they never gave a thought to changing the foundations.”<sup>34</sup> R.S. Sharma too echoes similar views and agrees that only occasionally the Buddhist texts show some lurking sympathy for the lower orders<sup>35</sup> and that early Buddhism could not have crusaded against the upper castes, as they constituted the interest of its patrons.<sup>36</sup>

Undeniably lower castes, especially the *suddas* had a very low *representation* in the *Samgha*. An analysis of the background of various *tharas* and *theris* mentioned in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*

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<sup>26</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, trs. T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, London: SBB, 1899-1910 (henceforth DB).I.139-141.

<sup>27</sup> E. Senart, *Caste in India: The Facts and the System*, London: Methuen, 1930: 305.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 153f.

<sup>29</sup> H. Oldenberg, *The Buddha- His Life, His Doctrines, His Order*, London: Williams, 1882: 155-59 (originally published 1927).

<sup>30</sup> M. Weber, *The Religion of India*, ed and tr H.H. Garth & D. Martindale, Glencoe & Illinois: The Free Press, 1958: 225-27.

<sup>31</sup> R. Fick, *The Social Organization of North-East India in Buddha’s Time*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920: 335.

<sup>32</sup> C. Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch*, vol. I, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954: xxii.

<sup>33</sup> C. Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977: 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> R.S. Sharma, “Material Background of the Origin of Buddhism,” M. Sen & M.B. Rao (eds), *Das Capital Centenary Volume: A Symposium*, Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1968: 94.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 58-66.

showed that about 91% of them were *dvijās* (twice born, i.e., the upper three castes) and only 9% came from the *sudda* background.<sup>37</sup> One has only to go through the Pāli canonical literature to see how strong in numbers were the brāhmaṇa followers of the Buddha who had rejected the claim of their brāhmaṇahood by birth in theory, but followed mostly in practice. It has been shown that well over 40% of the leading *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* taken together belonged to the brāhmaṇa caste.<sup>38</sup> It has been pointed out that the Buddha used the *vaṇṇa-jāti* terminology of his times in his reference to existing society and only tended to rank the *khattiyas* higher than the brāhmaṇas. He ridiculed Brahmanical pretensions to ritual purity and social eminence and insisted that a person be judged by his individual virtue rather than his familial, class or social origins, which was precisely the demand of the new urban social classes who felt closer to Buddhism than the traditional Brahmanical sacrifice-dominated Vedic cults.<sup>39</sup>

Of all the men and women mentioned in the Pāli *Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas*, over 80% came from *khattiya* and brāhmaṇa families.<sup>40</sup> *Suddas* and *caṇḍālas* constituted only about 11% of the total manpower of Buddhist, if one were to go by the information available in the Pāli *Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas*.<sup>41</sup>

The appeal of the Buddha's doctrine primarily to men and women of urban background is unmistakable. Most of the sermons recorded in the *Nikāyas* were delivered in large cities like Sāvattihī, Rājagaha, and Kosambī. Of the 315 human bodhisattvas of the *Jātakas*, over eighty-four percent were born in urban centres in the families of kings, their ministers or business magnates. The Buddha is said to have spent most of his Rainy Retreats at the Jetavana, whose price, we are told, was equal to gold coins spread over its entire surface. It is revealing that as many as seventy-one percent of the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* listed in the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* came from urban areas and nearly eighty-six percent came from big cities like Sāvattihī, Rājagaha, Kapilvatthu, and Vesālī. Some of the Buddhist texts prescribe that the Buddhas can only be born in *khattiya* or brāhmaṇa families and<sup>42</sup> and that one born of the womb of a slave, can never be a Bodhisatta!<sup>43</sup>

D.P. Chattopadhyaya, taking a balanced view, argued that while it is true that Buddhism was supported by monarchs, merchants and contemporary aristocrats, it would be superficial to see only this aspect of Buddhism. In his opinion, Buddhism was destined to become for various reasons the "biggest socio-religious movement in Indian history." He believed that the Buddha's attitude to injustice of the caste system and his attacks upon brāhmaṇic rituals were significant reasons for its appeal to the people. However, Chattopadhyaya also argues that the Buddha created an illusion of liberty, equality, and fraternity by modelling his Saṃgha on the tribal values, whereas in reality these values were being trampled upon in the world outside the Saṃgha.<sup>44</sup>

Though the all-pervading influence of caste system had in fact affected Buddhist way of thinking, yet it cannot be denied that the Buddha threw the doors of his Saṃgha open to the lowliest of the low who

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<sup>37</sup>B.G. Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist Elite," *JIH*, XLIII, Pt. II, 1965: 395.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.* 395.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>See, K.T.S. Sarao, *Origin and Nature of Ancient Indian Buddhism*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev ed, Taipei: CBBEFA, 2004: Appendices 5a and 5b.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>See, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (Henceforth DPPN).II.324.

<sup>43</sup>See, DPPN.II.323; *the Paramatthajotikā II*, the *Sutta-Nipāta* commentary, ed. H. Smith, London: PTS, 1916-18 (henceforth SnA).I.550f.

<sup>44</sup>D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Lokāyata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, N. Delhi: People's Publishing House: 1978: 466-67.

could achieve the bliss of the nibbāna.<sup>45</sup> Buddhism made no distinction in the imparting of knowledge.<sup>46</sup> As pointed out by Rhys Davids, the advantages or disadvantages arising from birth, occupation, and social status were completely irrelevant when it came to recruitment into the Saṃgha, the only organ of the society over which the Buddha had complete control.<sup>47</sup> He supports his argument by citing examples of *Vinayācariya* Upāli (barber), Sunita (*pukkusa*), Sāti (fisherman), Subhā (daughter of a smith), and Puṇṇā and Puṇṇikā (slave girls).<sup>48</sup> However, outside the Saṃgha, argues Rhys Davids, the Buddha tried to influence public opinion by a “constant inculcation of reasonable views.” He cites the example of the *Āmagandha Sutta* of the *Sutta-Nipāta*, where the Buddha points out that defilement does not come from eating this or that, prepared and given by this or that person, but from evil action, speech and thought.<sup>49</sup> Actually, Rhys Davids was of the opinion that had the views of the Buddha won the day, the evolution of social gradation and distinctions would have developed differently and the caste system would never have been built up.<sup>50</sup>

The Buddha argued that just as the king or the owner of the royal domain should not appropriate all revenues to himself, so also a brāhmaṇa or a samaṇa should not monopolize all knowledge to himself.<sup>51</sup> In the Buddhist view anybody could be a teacher irrespective of his caste and it is said that a teacher is always to be respected, be he a sudda, a caṇḍāla or a pukkusa.<sup>52</sup> In fact, when the Sākyan youths and their employee and barber Upāli approached the Buddha together for ordination, the Buddha is said to have ordained Upāli before the Sākyan youths, so that their pride of birth and caste may be humbled.<sup>53</sup> It is typical of the Buddhist attitude that in a *Jātaka* story a brāhmaṇa loses the charm learnt from a caṇḍāla because of denying his teacher out of shame.<sup>54</sup> A Buddhist monk or a nun never made any distinction between people while begging for food and could approach any householder for a meal, or could eat at his house when invited by him.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it cannot be denied that Buddhism left lasting impact on the social organization in India.

Gender equality is another issue that concerns our subject under hand. While evaluating Pāli Buddhist attitude toward women, it needs to be kept in mind that most of our understanding is based on the functioning of the saṃgha and its members. The Buddha or for that matter the saṃgha had very little or no control over the functioning of the society at large. But on the other hand, the society could influence the decisions of the Buddhist saṃgha in many ways as the latter had to depend upon it for various kinds of support. In the absence of a towering personality such as the Buddha himself, the influence of the aggressively male-dominated ancient Indian Brāhmaṇical society may have been inescapable. Androcentric-patriarchy, as it functioned in Brāhmaṇical ancient India, regarded men as normal and women as an exception to the normal. Such a system considered men as legitimate masters

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<sup>45</sup>*Khattiya brāhmaṇa vessā suddā caṇḍālapukkusā/ Sabbe va soratā dantā sabbe va parinibbutā* (J.IV.303).

<sup>46</sup>That the members of the lower orders actually got into the Saṃgha is indicated by quite a few instances. Mātanga, the son of a caṇḍāla, is said to have attained infinite bliss, which many khattiyas and brāhmaṇas could not attain (Sn.vv. 137 and 138). A monk is described as a former hawk-trainer (DPPN.I.174.) and two caṇḍālas as adopting the homeless state (J.IV.390-401). Nearly a dozen suddas and caṇḍālas are mentioned in the Pāli *Tiṭṭhaka* who reached positions of seniority within the Saṃgha (K.T.S. Sarao, *Op Cit.*: Appendix.4).

<sup>47</sup>DB.I.102.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>DB.I.104.

<sup>50</sup>DB.I.107.

<sup>51</sup>D.I.226-230.

<sup>52</sup>*Khattiya brāhmaṇa vessā suddā caṇḍāla pukkusa yasmā dhammaṃ vijāneyya so hi tassa naruttamo*.(J.IV.205).

<sup>53</sup>Vin.II.182; Bu.I.61.

<sup>54</sup>J.IV.200ff.

<sup>55</sup>Vin.III.184-85; IV.80, 177.

and holders of all positions that society valued, whereas women were expected to acquiesce and assist men in maintaining their status. In other words, men had power over women and monopolized all the roles and pursuits that society most valued and rewarded, such as religious leadership and economic power.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, inequality was the fundamental basis of androcentric-patriarchy in ancient India under which men literally ruled over women, prescribing the rules and parameters by and within which women were reckoned to conduct themselves. Women who did not conform, and many who did, had to bear another form of male dominance- physical violence. Male power over females formed the very basis of all forms of social hierarchy and oppression.<sup>57</sup> But one of the most abusive aspects of androcentrism and patriarchy in ancient India was men's automatic, rather than earned or deserved, power over women. Ascetical misogyny of Brāhmaṇism was even more negative and aggressively hostile in its expression toward women and the feminine. It voiced its own distinctive set of concerns and perceived women as agents of destruction, distraction, and ruin. Asceticization and Brāhmaṇization of Buddhism was not only a black chapter in the history of Indian women as the bhikkhunī-saṃgha got snuffed out of existence as a result thereof but also a tragedy for Buddhism itself as it lost its identity.

As a result of the repeated editing of the canon one can find in it a multiplicity of opinions expressed regarding women. These opinions range from the unusually positive to downright condemnation and insult. In order to understand this kind of multiplicity of opinions, it is imperative to recognize the specific institutional or intellectual context out of which each of such opinions arose.<sup>58</sup> In the opinion of Kate Blackstone Buddhist misogynistic attitude grew out of the fact that women's ordination was perceived as a serious and inescapable threat to the *dhamma* and *vinaya*.<sup>59</sup> The Pāli *Vinaya* contains a meticulous transference of the authority of the Buddha onto the saṃgha as a corporate body, and if that authority is displayed as inherently masculine, then following that logic, women cannot be considered full members of the saṃgha.<sup>60</sup> Women's presence in the saṃgha is depicted as a grave tragedy<sup>61</sup> and Blackstone perceives an important clue in it as to why women's ordination was seen as posing such a threat and how institutional subordination was used in the hope of averting it.<sup>62</sup> However, scholars who have tried to explain this can be divided into two diametrically opposite groups. One group explains this through an egalitarian attitude later modified by misogynistic editors,<sup>63</sup> and the other sees a bit-by-bit betterment from

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<sup>56</sup>It must be remembered that patriarchy is not an inevitable necessity of human biology but was the cultural creation of a certain epoch in human history. (See, Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>57</sup>The abuse of power is a major human problem, and androcentrism and patriarchy are rife with abuse of power. In fact, in modern times androcentrism and patriarchy may directly be linked to the rise of militarism, violence against animals and the ecologically dangerous use of the environment. Such a conclusion is based on the fact that all such policies share an attitude of glorifying and approving the power of one group over another as inevitable and appropriate.

<sup>58</sup>One can often see such a diverse and sometimes even contradictory attitude within a single text. A quintessential example of such a paradox is the incident of the founding of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha, a story in which we find Gotama, the Buddha, recognizing that women indeed are quite capable of attaining the highest goal of nibbāna, but adding at the same time that the formation of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha will tragically reduce the Dhamma's life by half: "If women had not been allowed to go forth from the home to the homeless life, then long would have lasted the godly life; for a thousand years... But now... since women have gone forth... not for long will the godly life last... just for 500 years." (A.IV.278).

<sup>59</sup>Kate Blackstone, "Damming the Dhamma: Problems with Bhikkhunīs in the Pāli Vinaya," a paper presented at the *Twelfth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Lausanne, Switzerland, August 1999.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>It is compared to a house falling prey to robbers, a rice field stricken by disease, and sugar-cane attacked by red rust.

<sup>62</sup>Kate Blackstone, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>63</sup>I. B. Horner (*Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975: 193) was the first one to come up with this idea. Now a large number of scholars hold such a view, especially, Nancy S. Barnes ("Buddhism," A. Sharma (ed.), *Women in Religion*, Albany: State University of New York, 1987: 105-133); Cornelia D. Church ("Temptress, Housewife, Nun: Women's Role in Early Buddhism," *Anima*, 1, 1975: 54); Rita Gross (*Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminine History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992: 34-38); Kajiyama Yuichi ("Women in Buddhism," *Eastern Buddhist*, NS, XV No. 2 Autumn 1982: 53-70); and Tessa Bartholomeusz (*Women*

an inherently sexist, even misogynist attitude in Theravāda to the growth of sexual egalitarianism in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna.<sup>64</sup>

Personally the Buddha treated women at par with men within the saṃgha. It appears that the anti-women statements that one finds in the ancient Indian Buddhist literature are an interpolation into the original word of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*) by the monastic élite whose attitude toward women was shaped, at least partly, by the various historical developments.<sup>65</sup> It may be pointed out that major portion of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* appears to have been compiled at the Third Buddhist Council.<sup>66</sup> In this and the earlier two councils, called to decide the *Buddhavacana*, the dominant androcentric-patriarchal monks were able to carry through their own points of view. The age of the Buddha was a witness to the origin and development of the Gaṅgā Urbanization as well as the emergence of an individualism and its effects upon those who socially and spiritually lived on the margins of the prevailing Brāhmaṇical culture. The new emerging social order had very little interest in defending the prevailing social values, and in such a climate both women and people of lower social strata in general were freer to explore and profess religious pursuits of their choice. Just as the goal set by the Buddha was not limited to those born in any particular social denomination, so it was not limited to those born as males. Both of these positions reflect an attempt to locate virtue and spiritual potential beyond conventional social and gender distortions. Both can be seen as evidence of a newly emerging sense of the individuality that began to take precedence over narrower biological and social compulsions in the post-Vedic period. Many women were quick to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the Buddha. Some of the Buddha's most acclaimed benefactresses were women, indicating not only that there were a large number of women of independent means during this period but also that their support was instrumental in nursing the nascent saṃgha. Among the female followers of the Buddha, some remained lay-followers and others gave up worldly pursuits to become nuns. In the role of nun or virgin, sexuality could be transcended as unimportant in the accomplishment of human potential. In the role of mother, sexuality is usually viewed as in a controlled state, a state of equilibrium. The Buddha viewed the masculine and the feminine as complementary aspects of a unified spirit, in the manner of compassion and wisdom. Undoubtedly there were many women among Gotama's followers who were recognized as fully and equally enlightened and the earliest strata of the Indian Buddhist literature agrees that women could and did become arahants, fully liberated individuals living free from the psycho-physiological suffering that actualizes human existence. Sources within the *Tipiṭaka*

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*Under the Bo Tree*, a PhD Dissertation submitted to the University of Virginia, 1991: 55-61).

<sup>64</sup>For instance, Diana Paul (*Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979: 245-302) ascribes the misogyny of early Buddhist texts to the Indian context in which they evolved. Karen Lang ("Lord Death's Snare: Gender-related Imagery in the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2, 1986: 78) and Janice Willis ("Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism," Y. Haddad & E. Findly (eds), *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985: 59-85) perceive a positive progression in the portrayal of women as we move from Pāli to Mahāyāna texts. Though Rita Gross (*Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminine History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992: 57, 114) acknowledges positive portrayals of women in early Pāli texts such as the *Therīgāthā*, she argues that the full flowering of an incipient egalitarianism takes place only with the growth of Vajrayāna. A few studies on the implication of the entry of women into the saṃgha have also tried to explain it from either the sociological point of view (E.g., C. Kabilsingh, *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha*, Varanasi: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1984; Mohan Wijayaratna, *Les Moniales Bouddhistes: Naissance et Développement du Monachisme Féminin*, Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1991: 29-30 and *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravāda Tradition*, tr. C. Grangier & S Collins, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 158-163), or they have located its language within the context of the *Vinaya's* legalistic discourse (E.g., Ute Hhsken, "Die Legende von der Einrichtung des buddhistischen Nonnenordens im Vinaya-Piṭaka der Theravādin," R. Grhnendahl et al (eds), *Studien zur Indologie und Buddhismuskunde*, Bonn: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1993: 151-170).

<sup>65</sup>See, Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism" Jose Cabezon (ed), *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992: 3-36.

<sup>66</sup>Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983: 70.



offer many examples of arahants among the women who had renounced worldly life and even a few cases of women like Khemā, who, as chief consort to the king of Magadha, became fully enlightened even before giving up householder's life. Many amongst these well-known women followers like Pātācārā and Soṇā, were known for their ability to teach the dhamma; others like Khemā were particularly held in high esteem by the Buddha himself for the depth of their knowledge. Some of the bhikkhunīs had their own following, and were capable not just of introducing the dhamma, but of bringing new aspirants to full liberation without the mediation of the Buddha or some other senior bhikkhu. In the *Tipiṭaka*, women most often are presented as teachers to other women, yet even the conservative editors of these texts preserved a few stories of women like Dhammadinnā, who, after becoming a bhikkhunī, had the opportunity to instruct her former husband, Visākha. In the *Cūḷavedallasutta*,<sup>67</sup> Dhammadinnā answers a long series of questions regarding aspects of the doctrine and practice put to her by Visākha, a prominent merchant and lay Buddhist teacher, who the commentaries say, had a substantial following of his own. Visākha later reports Dhammadinnā's answers to the Buddha, who is greatly pleased, proclaiming that he would have answered in precisely the same way. There is enough evidence to suggest that women not only were conspicuously present in the earliest community, but also seem to have held prominent and honoured places both as practitioners and teachers. But as we move to the post-Gotama period, though whereas women patrons and donors remain quite visible, the bhikkhunī-saṃgha does not appear to have enjoyed the prestige or creativity one might have expected of the successors of Khemā, Dhammadinnā, and the early arahant nuns.<sup>68</sup> In Buddhism, not only is the path open to women, but it also is indeed the same path for both women and men. It is not that sex and gender differences do not exist, but they are rather "soteriologically insignificant"<sup>69</sup> that they amount at most to a diversion from the true goal of liberation. When 500 wives of king Udena, including Sāmāvatī, perished in a fire, remarking on the tragic incidence, the Buddha said: "Monks, among these, some women disciples are stream-winners, some once-returners, some non-returners."<sup>70</sup> This clearly implies that women were considered quite capable of accomplishing the standard stages of the path of liberation by which one becomes an arahant.

"And be it a woman, or be it man for whom  
Such chariot doth wait, by that same car  
Into nibbāna's presence shall they come."<sup>71</sup>

Passages such as this suggest that whatever limitations women might conventionally be held to have had, they were not to be kept out of any form of Buddhist practice nor from the ultimate goal, i.e., nibbāna. Radical as this position was socially, it was quite consistent with the basic

philosophical principles of the Buddha's teaching. It was a revolutionary breakthrough in the sense that women were explicitly included in the Buddhist quest for liberation. In other words, the Buddha and some of his associates like Ānanda clearly held the view that one's sex, like one's caste, presented no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering. However, there may have been one negative side effect of the founding of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha. According to Altekar, the institution of nunnery in Jainism and Buddhism and the instances of several grown up maidens taking holy orders against their parents' wish and some of them later falling from high spiritual ideal must also have strengthened the view of those who favoured marriage at an early age especially before puberty. We may, therefore, conclude that after the establishment of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha, the marriageable age of girls was

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<sup>67</sup>M.I.298-305.

<sup>68</sup>A. Sponberg, *Op. Cit.* 7.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.* 9.

<sup>70</sup>*The Udānaṃ*, ed. P. Steinthal, London: PTS, 1885 (henceforth Ud).VI.X.

<sup>71</sup>*The Saṃyutta Nikāya*, ed. M.L. Feer, London: PTS, 1884-1898 (henceforth S).I.5-6.

being constantly lowered.<sup>72</sup> Almost nonexistence of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha in the modern Theravādi countries also reflects this inherent bias of the South Asian society against women. However, as pointed out by Horner, it goes without saying that the Buddha “saw the potentially good, the potentially spiritual in them as he saw it in men.”<sup>73</sup>

Buddhism offered better opportunities to women than did the surrounding brāhmaṇism.<sup>74</sup> Through the bhikkhunī-saṃgha, women did have an alternative to their family roles. In one form or another, this faith contained teachings about sexual equality and the ultimate irrelevance of gender. However, his colleagues in the saṃgha especially after his death relied on popular, often non-Buddhist beliefs lifted from the surrounding woman-hating Brāhmaṇical culture which believed that a woman should always be under the protective control of a male relative, whether father, husband, or son. Traditional Buddhist thought may have admitted that women were disadvantaged in Indian androcentric-patriarchy, but their difficulties are seen as a result of their kamma, accrued in past lives. Women can, however, overcome their suffering in the future by being reborn as men. Dissatisfying as this solution is to someone with feminist values, it does at least admit that male dominance is unpleasant and difficult for women and tries to offer hope in the long run.<sup>75</sup> A feminist would, of course, suggest that what needs to be eliminated is not female rebirth in the future, but the *present* conditions that make life difficult or intolerable for women. Thus it has been pointed out with some justification that though early Indian Buddhism had a strong ethical tradition, its tradition of social activism and criticism was not as strong. Buddhism has rather been censured for regarding the society at large as mulish and balky and thus, for its lack of “the willingness and the courage to name oppression as *oppression*.”<sup>76</sup>

If domesticity had been oppressive (as, in fact, it was and still is) then monasticism has usually been liberating for women as far as Buddhism is concerned. Women’s monasticism was most often women’s closest approximation to the self-determination and prestige normally accorded to men. However, this was not without its problems though as women’s order has fared far less well than men’s monasticism. Women as nuns received less economic support and prestige and less access to ritual and study that was enjoyed by men. In Buddhism like many other religious traditions, men’s celibacy and chastity were protected by isolating or restricting women to a delimited sphere. These institutions also have the power of limiting women’s access to the highest quality teaching and practising environment. Women who could be sited as role models, were not very many as compared to their male counterparts. They are largely exceptions to the norm for their gender. They could be called tokens. More importantly, they were largely unsupported by the institutional fabric of their society and their religion.

Some quarters have criticized the Buddha for having abandoned his wife and child. But this kind of criticism is misplaced. Regarding Siddhattha abandoning his wife and child, it must be remembered that their abandonment by him took place before and not after his enhancement to the status of a great person. The circumstances and mind-set under which he abandoned them were dictated by the prevailing circumstances under which those who wanted to seek spiritual insight were expected to “kick away gold, women and fame, the three universal fetters of man.”<sup>77</sup> Siddhattha did this while following the traditions of Brāhmaṇism in renouncing the world to seek knowledge and his actions at this stage cannot be

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<sup>72</sup>A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 3rd Edition, Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Dass, 1974: 54-55

<sup>73</sup>I.B. Horner: *Op. Cit.*: XXIV.

<sup>74</sup>In an interesting study, Katherine Young organized the major religions of the world along a continuum on a scale moving from the greatest formal or proclaimed male dominance to the greatest acceptance or inclusion of genuine female power. She suggested this order: Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (See, Katherine Young, “Introduction,” Arvind Sharma (ed), *Women in World Religions*, Albany: State University of New York, 1987:16.)

<sup>75</sup>Rita Gross, *Feminism & Religion: An Introduction*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996: 139.

<sup>76</sup>Diana Paul, *Op. Cit.*: 145.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid*:6.

extrapolated to force a meaning upon his views and actions after Enlightenment. The prosecution of Ānanda during the First Buddhist Council also proves the hardening of attitudes among the followers of the Buddha after he was no longer there to guide or control them. Yet the subordination of women in the Buddhist community might not have been universal. While women were, indeed, reduced to lowliness by both precept and practice, history also offers examples to the contrary. Bartholomeusz has shown how the case of Saṃghamittā proves this point of view. She was the daughter of the powerful Indian king Asoka, who had sent her to establish bhikkhunī-saṃgha in Sri Lanka. This is an indication of the high position that a woman might attain in the Buddhist hierarchy and suggests that, at least in Asoka's time, nothing in Buddhist doctrine prevented women from being considered equal to men.<sup>78</sup> There are some references in the Pāli *Tiṇṇaka* that accept and even appreciate the presence of women. For instance, Khemā was instructed by the Buddha in person. According to the legend, when he had finished, she attained arahantship together with a thorough grasp of the dhamma and its meaning. Thereafter, she became known for her great insight and was ranked high by the Buddha himself.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Sujātā, while returning from a festival, listened to the Buddha's discourse and she attained arahantship, together with complete grasp of the dhamma in form and meaning.<sup>80</sup> Kisā-Gotamī attained arahantship after understanding the dhamma preached by the Buddha.<sup>81</sup> Bhikkhunī Samā is said to have listened to the preachings of Ānanda and thereby attained arahantship.<sup>82</sup> Cittā was ordained by Mahāpajāpati Gotamī and later won arahantship.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, bhikkhunī Muttā aimed freedom not only from three crooked things, i.e. quern, mortar, and husband but also from rebirth and death.<sup>84</sup> All the above stated examples show that the Buddha respected women as equals and personally bestowed his teachings on many of them.

The bhikkhunī-saṃgha was founded five years later than the bhikkhu-saṃgha.<sup>85</sup> In the early stages of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha, bhikkhunīs may have learnt not only various forms of disciplinary acts but also different aspects of knowledge from bhikkhus. Here, it must be remembered that the social and spiritual opportunities offered by the Buddha to women being quite radical, must have drawn many objections from men, including bhikkhus. As a result, he must have been well aware of the fact that his female disciples would be constantly harassed and humiliated. Moreover, apprehensions that bhikkhunīs would be susceptible to male violence were realistic and are proved by the various incidents of male violence against bhikkhunīs, as do regulations designed to prevent such a violence. Thus, as pointed out by Rita Gross these regulations usually restrict women from lonesome travel and practices, just as today we often counter male violence against women by advising them not to be at unsafe places at unusual hours.<sup>86</sup> As a result of the establishment of the monasteries on the outskirts of human settlements, bhikkhunīs were exposed to the strong possibilities of lay-people finding faults with them, taking advantage of them or even sexually harassing them as single women. For instance, once several bhikkhunīs were going along a highroad to Sāvattihī through the country of Kosala. A certain bhikkhunī there, wanting to relieve herself, having stayed behind alone, went on afterwards. People, having seen that bhikkhunī, seduced her.<sup>87</sup> According

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<sup>78</sup>Tessa Bartholomuesz, "The Female Mendicant in Buddhist Sri Lanka," Jose Ignacio Cabezon (ed), *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992: 38-51.

<sup>79</sup>*The Therīgāthā*, eds. K.R. Norman & L. Alsdorf; London: PTS, 1966 (henceforth Thī).61.

<sup>80</sup>Thī.69.

<sup>81</sup>Thī.89.

<sup>82</sup>Thī.25.

<sup>83</sup>Thī.36.

<sup>84</sup>Thī.11.

<sup>85</sup>Kajiyama Yuichi, *Op. Cit.*: 159-60.

<sup>86</sup>Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminine History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992: 36.

<sup>87</sup>*Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, (henceforth SBB).XII.189.

to the Vinaya, lay people and non-Buddhists were always free to criticize bad conduct of bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus. Incriminations and scandalmongering of people toward bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus abound in the Vinaya. It is worthy of notice that harsher opprobrium was directed toward bhikkhunīs than toward bhikkhus. When a bhikkhunī did something wrong, people frequently reproved bhikkhunīs as “shaven-headed whores.” In contrast, when a bhikkhu did something wrong, people never spoke in derogatory terms of him to the extent they did in the case of bhikkhunīs. Comparison of the criticisms of bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus suggests that people in ancient Indian society were more wrathful toward the wrongdoings of bhikkhunīs than those of bhikkhus. It also indicates that this provided a reason for the formulation of more rules for bhikkhunīs than bhikkhus in this category. People in the society were unwilling to permit women to fracture out from the household life. For women to regulate and protect themselves, even if consistent with the notion of parity, was nonetheless socially unthinkable. In the opinion of I.B. Horner, it is quite likely that they were in general considered as of poorer calibre than the monks, and that, therefore, there had to be a severer testing in order to weed out those who had entered the saṃgha without having a real purpose.<sup>88</sup>

The Buddha treated women as individuals in their own right. Doctrinally also he considered them at par with men, though such a position appears limited to women’s ability to attain nibbāna. Social rights of women within the society at large may not have drawn the attention of the Buddha as much as it deserved. Yet, it is important to remember that whenever opportunities came up, the Buddha did speak his mind. This is proved by his remark to Pasenadi, who became unhappy on hearing the news that his queen had given birth to a daughter rather than a son. The Buddha told him that a daughter may actually prove to be an even better offspring than a son as she may grow up to be wise and virtuous. Having once noted that women were quite capable of pursuing the religious life, the early Buddhist saṃgha had to decide as to what was to be done with regard to the interest that was generated by a view such as this. In the beginning, this does not appear to have posed any problem as the towering personality and charisma of the Buddha was enough to offset any worries regarding authority on the inside and acceptability at large on the outside. However, as the saṃgha developed during the post-Mahāparinibbāna period, it began to calibrate its character in relation to the society on the outside. With shift such as this, one can find increasing evidence of an attitude that meant that women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserved and reinforced the conventionally accepted social standards of male dominance and female subordination.

It cannot be denied that with the founding of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha, the Buddha granted a religious role to women that for a long time to come remained virtually without parallel in the history of the world. However, after his death, some practical considerations appear to have formed the basis of an excuse to speculate about the limitations of the female nature. This kind of mentality became increasingly characteristic of Buddhism as the saṃgha became more institutionalized and male dominated in the first several centuries following the Buddha’s death. The saṃgha, after the death of the Buddha, reconciled the religious direction he had provided it with the social contingencies within which the Buddhist community grew thereafter. Lay mentality unmistakably impresses itself on the workings of the Saṃgha especially because at least the majority within the Saṃgha believed that isolation from society was no object of monastic life.<sup>89</sup> This type of monk-and-layman intercourse on a regular basis must have left indelible impact of lay mentality on monk-mind. Such a contradiction made its appearance in Buddhism not out of the identification of realities of gender differences, but rather out of the additional supposition that this distinction consigned women to a lower capability for following the spiritual path. Though one can get

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<sup>88</sup>SBB.XX.xiv.

<sup>89</sup>*vihāre vijjamāne sulabhadassanaṃ dassanakāmānaṃ anikete duddassanaṃ bhavissati* [V. Trenckner (ed), *Milindapañha*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1880 (henceforth Mil): 212].

occasional glimpses into the lives of women through the autobiographical literature, but on the whole, one can examine only what Buddhist men had said about women historically, not what Buddhist women had claimed or felt. In contrast to an attitude of parity, which focussed on the capability of women to pursue the path, the focus, after the death of the Buddha, shifted from the women themselves, to a rather perceived danger to the integrity of the saṃgha, as it existed, within the broader social harmony. It was felt that women must be protected by some androcentric-patriarchal social structure like the family and the bhikkhu-saṃgha was ill-suited to that task for the simple reason that monks, by definition, had simply given up such social responsibilities.

Various contradictions that appeared in the post-Mahāparinibbāna saṃgha were sought to be reconciled through the invention of the story of Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī as the first bhikkhunī and her acceptance of the eight restrictive rules. Interestingly, Mahāpajāpatī became bhikkhunī after her husband's death by which time the Buddha had converted many women. Due to her prestige, her name appears to have been included in the mythologized version. I.B. Horner feels that the whole prophecy of the decline of the dhamma after 500 years may have been an addition by monks.<sup>90</sup> It is also worthy of notice that these contradictions were resolved only over a period of time and the version in the *Cullavagga*<sup>91</sup> is probably a still later attempt to rationalize and legitimize *post facto* what had already become the status quo. Beyond simple rationalization, one may also see a recurrent theme that attempts to reconcile the various contradictions. Mahāpajāpatī appears to have been chosen because she commanded great respect as a woman to whom the Buddha owed the greatest debt. To make the story look credible, the editors initially show Mahāpajāpatī as having accepted all eight of the restrictive rules readily, but later, approaching Ānanda to go back to the Buddha to see if he would relent on the first rule regarding seniority.<sup>92</sup> Such a concession would have allowed bhikkhunīs far greater status and prerogatives within the monastic community and one that would, thus, no doubt have significantly altered the subsequent history of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha. The reply, obviously, is shown as negative and justified on the ground that such a sexual parity was totally unprecedented. But by the time this dilemma became a social issue the bhikkhunī-saṃgha had certainly existed for quite some time. The bhikkhunīs, no doubt, had regulated themselves quite successfully and probably continued to do so after the resolution, albeit now officially under the control (and protection) of the monks. It was an uneasy compromise, most likely, but one that got the monks off the hook while also legitimizing as much as possible the existence of the anomalous group of quasi-autonomous women. However, in this story, the *Vinaya* redactors had to resolve many more issues. In the story, Mahāpajāpatī functions as a leader of women who parallels the Buddha's leadership of bhikkhus.<sup>93</sup> Despite the Buddha's initial rejection of her request, Mahāpajāpatī and her followers are also shown as having shaved, donned the yellow robes and following the Buddha and his saṃgha.<sup>94</sup> Such a

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<sup>90</sup>I.B. Horner: *Op. Cit.*: 105.

<sup>91</sup>Chapter.X.

<sup>92</sup>X.257.

<sup>93</sup>Jonathan Walters is of the opinion that Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī is the female counterpart to Gotama, the Buddha. Their clan-names reflect this, as does their treatment in the *Gotamī-Apadāna*. Both appear surrounded by their disciples (female and male, respectively); both save a group of 500 (nuns and monks, respectively) through their mercy; both are worshipped by deities (gods and goddesses, respectively), each pays mutual homage to the other, and there is a conscious parallelism in the descriptions of their respective deaths in the *Gotamī-Apadāna* and the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*. On the basis of these parallels, Walters argues that historically two separate paths for women and men existed in early Buddhism. According to him, Mahāpajāpatī's presentation in the *Apadāna* exemplifies the subordination required of all women in ancient India. (Jonathan Walters, "A Voice from the Silence: the Buddha's Mother's Story," *History of Religions* 33/4, 1994: 358-379). However, Liz Wilson disagrees and points out that, if gender connotations in the text can be laid aside, the parallels would be equal. (*Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*, Curzon, 1998: 44-51).

<sup>94</sup>In the Mahāsaṃghika-Lokottaravādin account of the story, her leadership and her subversiveness are emphasized. After the Buddha has rejected her initial request, she returns to her friends and proposes that they shave, don the yellow robes, and follow the Buddha. She then says "if the Buddha allows it, we will enter the religious path. If not, we will do it anyway." (See

position would mean not only a direct challenge to the authority of the Buddha but also an overturning of the hierarchical scheme to be maintained throughout the *Vinaya*. The *Vinaya* redactors resolved this contradiction by reestablishing the (*proper*) hierarchy of bhikkhus over bhikkhunīs, thus, separating the bhikkhu-saṃgha from the flood of contamination and allowing it to (re-)gain its purity. By accepting the authority of the monks, at least nominally, the bhikkhunīs may have gained a more acceptable place in the eyes of the broader society. But long term consequences of such an arrangement turned out to be disastrous for the bhikkhunī-saṃgha as it was subsequently relegated to a position of second-class status, a constraint that was certain to be reflected in the diminished prestige, educational opportunities, and financial support. Historically speaking, the bhikkhunī-saṃgha went into a steady decline in spite of having secured some degree of acceptability. Given the earlier precedent of accomplished women practitioners among the Buddhists, one might reasonably expect the bhikkhunīs to have maintained a creative religious life in the monasteries despite the increasing androcentric and patriarchal restrictions. Although that may have been the case at least for some centuries after the death of the Buddha, but in direct proportion to the increasing Brāhmanization and asceticization of Buddhism, life in the bhikkhunī-saṃgha appears to have become more and more marginalized and, finally, ceased to play any role in the official accounts of the tradition. By the third century CE, the bhikkhunī-saṃgha in India appears to have virtually disappeared from the official records. We know, from the report of the Chinese pilgrims in India, for example, that female monasteries continued to exist well into the seventh century CE and beyond, yet there is no record of what these women achieved in their practice or what they contributed to the larger Buddhist community. All this would not have been possible without the overt support of the bhikkhu-saṃgha, which had much to lose and little to gain for asserting a place of parity for the bhikkhunīs. For all its adherence to gender parity at the doctrinal level, institutional Buddhism was not able to (or saw no reason to) challenge prevailing attitudes about gender roles in the society. Thus, the initial success of the bhikkhunī-saṃgha in ancient India was followed by decline because people supported bhikkhus more readily than they supported bhikkhunīs.<sup>95</sup> There are unmistakable traces of the trends and the elements of lay mentality impressed in Saṃgha. The Saṃgha never aimed at completely isolating itself from the people as it was expected to work for the *bahujana hitāya*. In the *Milindapañha*,<sup>96</sup> for instance, it has been pointed out that monks must make themselves accessible to lay people and so live in monasteries. This monk-and-layman intercourse brought monkhood into such relationship with the life of the laity that it made inevitable the reaction of lay mentality on monk-mind. Thus, it is actually quite surprising that the bhikkhunī-saṃgha managed to survive for as long as it did, however, marginally.

Ascetical misogyny was the most hostile and negative tenor toward the feminine that one finds in the latest strata of Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.<sup>97</sup> Such an attitude suggested that a woman could neither attain to the highest religious ideals such as nibbāna, arahanthood, Bodhisattahood or Buddhahood nor could she become a Sakka, Māra or Brahmā.<sup>98</sup> She was directly held responsible for the fall of human race and death

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Edith Nolot (tr), *Regles de Discipline des Nonnes Bouddhistes: Le Bhikṣuṇīvinaya de L'Ecole Mahāsaṃghika-Lokottaravādin* (Paris: Collège de France, 1991). Now an increasing number of scholars finds it difficult to believe that the Buddha whose teachings were based on universality and gender equality would have created rules such as these. These rules and the legends connected with them are later interpolations.

<sup>95</sup>Rita M. Gross, *Feminism & Religion: An Introduction*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996: 83.

<sup>96</sup>*viḥāre vijjāmaṇe sulabhadassanaṃ dassanakāmānaṃ anikete duddassanaṃ bhaviṣṣati* (Mil.212).

<sup>97</sup>It was in this kind of background that the whole issue of women's ordination comes in for severest criticism and condemnation. Their ordination began to be seen as possibly the biggest tragedy in Buddhism and among other things is compared to mildew (*setaṭṭhika*) attacking a whole field of rice (BD.V.356).

<sup>98</sup>*The Buddhavaṃsa*, ed. N.A.Jayawickrama, London: PTS, 1974, (henceforth Bu).I.59; SnA.I.48f.; A.I.28; M.II.65-66. A Bodhisatta is expected to abandon his female partner (J.VI.552). It is interesting to notice that none of the bodhisattas mentioned in the 547 *Jātakas* is a female.

of the spiritual being.<sup>99</sup> Now the feminine came to be perceived as base, closer to nature, conjurer, crackpot, crooked, deceitful, degraded, destructive, elusive, envious, fatuous, feeble-minded, foolish, greedy, imperfect, lustful, mundane, mysterious, prestidigitator, profligate, profane, ravaging, sensual, sinful, timid, treacherous, unbridled, ungrateful, untrustworthy, vile, vulnerable, weak in wisdom and wicked.<sup>100</sup> She came to be equated with a snake in five aspects i.e. “angry, ill-tempered, deadly poisonous, forked-tongued and betrayer of friends.”<sup>101</sup> The *Jātakas* present themselves as the ultimate example of this kind of virulent attitude.<sup>102</sup> Now it was felt that association with woman was polluting and deadly because she was capable of causing defilement and impurity even in those sanctified souls “whose sins have been stayed by the power of ecstasy.”<sup>103</sup> Over and over again it is pointed out that women are biologically determined to be sexually uncontrollable.<sup>104</sup> As a consequence of this kind of mind-set, it was given out that the female must be suppressed, controlled, and conquered by the male. Female sexuality began to be seen as a threat to culture, society and religion which in turn was used as a rationale for relegating women to a marginal existence.<sup>105</sup>

Such aggressive misogynist sentiments arose in response to a specific set of issues. The cosmogonic myths of the old Indian culture, focussed on the fact that this world has evolved from a pure realm of formless, asexual beings. Embodiment and sexual differentiation were seen as the manifestation of a lower state of existence, one bound by attachment to the earth and brought on by eating and sexual activity. These scriptures imply that, since sexuality was involved in the fall, abstention from sexual pleasures will weaken the ties that bind humanity to the lower material world and thus enable seekers after Enlightenment to ascend to the luminous state of perfection forfeited by their ancestors. Given this world-

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<sup>99</sup>In fact, this is the theme of the *Aggañña Suttanta*.

<sup>100</sup>*The Book of Gradual Saying*, trs. F.L. Woodward & E.M. Hare, reprints, London: PTS, 1955-1970 (henceforth GS).I.93; IV.150; *The Book of Kindred Saying*, trs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, S.S. Thera, and F.L. Woodward, London: PTS, 1950-1956 (henceforth KS).I.146; A.II.61; J.I.111, 134, 285, 289; II.474, 478, 527; IV.124-25; V.36, 435; VI.17, 339. It may be interesting to note some of the post-Mahāparinibbāna Buddhist statements made against women: 1. “given an opportunity, all women will go wrong” (J.V.435); 2. “Like river, road, or drinking shed, assembly hall or inn/ So free to all are womenfolk, no limits check their sin.” (J.V.446); 3. “the attribute of women folk is scolding.” (GS.IV.150); 4. They are “the peril of sea-monsters” (*susukābhyam*). (A.I.126); 5. “The ways of womenfolk are secret, not open,” (A.I.282); 6. Women are seen bent upon losing their honour and respect even when they were kept “in mid-ocean in a palace by the Simbal lake.” (J.II.90) 7. “Verily, woman is wicked and ungrateful. Of old, Asura-demons swallowed women, though they guarded them in their belly, they could not keep them faithful to one man.” (J.II.527). 8. It is very hard to know the nature of women (J.V.446) as they are “vile wretches” and “no limit bounds their shame.” (J.V.448). In the *Culla-Paduma Jātaka* (J.I.115-121.) the Bodhisatta relates how he offered his thirsty wife blood from his knee to drink and she in turn tried to kill him and started living with a man with criminal background. At another place, the Bodhisatta says: “Surely Brethren, even when I was in an animal form, I knew well the ingratitude, the wiles, the wickedness, and immorality of womenfolk, and at that time so far from being in their power I kept them under my control.” (J.V.419). Still, in another *Jātaka* story, the Bodhisatta tells his father “if women come into this house, they will bring no peace of mind for me and for you.” (J.IV.43).

<sup>101</sup>A.II.260-61. The same *sutta* mentions the following five disadvantageous similarities between a snake and a woman: unclean, evil-smelling, timid, fearful and betrayer of friends.

<sup>102</sup>Such an attitude is reflected through the innumerable episodes of the Bodhisatta taking pride in being called a woman-hater (*anithigandha*) (J.IV.48), seducing the bride of a king to prove a point (J.VI.235-236), a *generous* king giving away his wife to a man to enjoy for seven days (J.II.337) or a king telling a woman, with whom he has casual sex, to bring the child to him only if she gives birth to a male child (J.I.28), so on and so forth.

<sup>103</sup>The *Jātakas* are replete with examples of women leading ascetics astray from their avowed goal. See, for instance, J.I.27; IV.468; V.157

<sup>104</sup>The recurrent theme of post-Mahāparinibbāna Buddhism is that they are of easy virtue who end their lives unsatiated and unrepentant with “intercourse, adornment, and child-bearing.” (GS.I.77; J.II.342).

<sup>105</sup>Simultaneously, the mystery of the female body and its powers came to be associated with disruptive cosmological powers. Exceptions to this view, however, may be found with regard to female sex-workers such as Ambapālī. A sex-worker’s sexuality, although feared, was also desired. She was powerful because she was not subjugated by any single male authority figure. She was appreciated because she gave of herself indiscriminately.

view, it is not surprising that impurity came to be associated with the natural realm and female fecundity, while transcendent purity began to be expressed in masculine celibacy. In the Buddhist literature such sentiments most often are expressed in discussions of male religious practice, and especially in texts that present the spiritual ideal primarily in terms of ascetic purity. This suggests that the psychological demands of ascetic celibacy are more central to understanding this attitude than the legacy of cosmogonic assumptions. In this we find a fear of the feminine, and a fear specifically of its power to undermine male celibacy.

Rejection of household life by a religion with ascetic ideals basically meant rejection of woman and ancient Indian Buddhism of post-Mahāparinibbāna period came to perceive rejection of woman as an act of religious merit. The stories, images, and ideals frequently became vehicles of misogynist views.<sup>106</sup> Like non-renunciants, transgressors, and novices, bhikkhunīs did not have the right to protest statements uttered during official proceedings or comment upon the behaviour of the bhikkhus and, in fact, were completely subordinated to them.<sup>107</sup> Women began to be ridiculed and condemned for their *typical womanish* characteristics (*itthinimitta*) and attitude (*itthikutta*).<sup>108</sup> It is not surprising that post-Mahāparinibbāna Buddhist ethos does not consider women as worthy of sitting in a court of justice, capable of embarking on business, good enough to reach the essence of things, mature enough to be good managers of households or competent and desirable to be heads of social and political institutions.<sup>109</sup> This type of vehement, doctrinaire, terrifying logic painfully degraded women and obviously reduced them to a state of marginal existence.

Thus, in the post-Mahāparinibbāna Buddhism only those women appear to have been accepted into the saṃgha who were either over and above the morality of the society like Emperor Asoka's daughter Saṃghamittā or those who were rootless and free and had already fractured out of the moral moorings of the society. But nevertheless, it offered a chance to some women in whatever condition or circumstance. In an androcentric-patriarchal society, it must have been indeed a tricky situation whereby on the one hand, the bhikkhus and the bhikkhunīs had to maintain sufficient distance from each other to avoid the

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<sup>106</sup>Womanhood is invariably seen as "a snare of Māra" (A.III.68).

<sup>107</sup>It was prescribed in no uncertain terms that "one should not carry out greetings, rise up for salutation and proper duties toward women." (BD.V.227, 358). On seeing a bhikkhu, a bhikkhunī was told to get off the way when still at a distance, and make room for him, greet him respectfully, rise from her seat, salute him with folded hands and pay proper respects even if she was senior to him. (Vin.V.52; SBE.XX.345). The admonition of monks by bhikkhunīs was strictly forbidden, but was allowed the other way around. (A.IV.277-78).

<sup>108</sup>A.IV.57; *The Dhamma-saṅgaṇi*, eds. P.V. Bapat & R.D. Vadekar, Poona: The Bhandarkar Research Institute, 1940 (henceforth Dhs).633, 713, 836; J.I.296, 433, II.127, 329, IV.219, 472; *The Dhammapada Aṭṭhakkathā*, eds. H. Smith, H.C. Norman, and L.S. Tailang, London: PTS, 1906-15 (henceforth DhA).IV.197. Now any attempt by a woman to deviate from the standards laid down for her began to be portrayed as an "unwomanlike behaviour" (*anitti*) (J.I.126). During the post-Mahāparinibbāna period women were primarily expected to train themselves in a way that "To whatever husband ... parents... (gave them)... for him (they would) rise up early, be the last to retire, be willing workers, order all things sweetly and be gentle voiced." (A.II.37; IV.265).

<sup>109</sup>1. They are "unworthy of sitting in a court of justice, embark on business or reach the essence of things," because they are "uncontrolled (*kodha*)... envious (*issukā*)... greedy (*maccharī*)... and)... weak in wisdom (*duppañño*)." (A.I.82-83). 2. It was prescribed that bhikkhunīs must remain away from the *pavāraṇā* ceremony (*Mahāvagga* (henceforth Mv).IV 2-14.) and also outside the boundaries during bhikkhus' recitation of *Pātimokkha* (even though it includes the rules for bhikkhunīs). (Mv.I.36.1-2). 3. It was held that "an official act... which requires the presence of four persons, if performed by a congregation in which a bhikkhunī is the fourth, is no real act, and ought not to be performed." (SBE.XVII.269). Thus, they were no more to be counted to make up the quorum required of any of the formal acts of the saṃgha from ordination of bhikkhus and other major ritual events to disciplinary proceedings, and they could not split a saṃgha even if they sided with the schismatic. (Mv.VI.5.1). Warning signals begun to be sounded that a land becomes "infamous... which owns a woman's sway and rule, and infamous are the men who yield themselves to women's dominion." (J.I.43). 4. The *Jātakas* prophesied that bad days will come when "men will leave everything at the disposal of their wives," (J.I.342) as they are "like cats, deceiving and cajoling to bring to ruin one who has come into their power." (J.V.152.).



question of impropriety, and on the other the saṃgha had to deal with the social unacceptability (indeed unimaginability) of an autonomous group of women not under the direct regulation and control of some male authority. By being formally associated with the monks, the bhikkhunīs were able to enjoy the benefits of leaving the household life without incurring immediate harm. Whilst it is understandable to abhor the attitude and behaviour of the society toward women which necessitated such a protection, but it is misplaced to criticize the saṃgha for adopting this particular policy.<sup>110</sup> Now women could improve their lot by taking their future into their own hands. It must be remembered that the worst enemies of a woman were and still are the family, marriage, and maternity- where she is exploited by man as a child-bearing and child-rearing machine. The fact that Buddhism provided her with the opportunity of not only breaking free of such institutions but also of getting unionized- it is no mere achievement. It was only under such an environment that a unique text such as the *Therīgāthā*, was produced, which should be mentioned whenever the issue of Buddhism and women is considered. This would balance the record.

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<sup>110</sup>Ian Astley, (A book review of) Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992, in *Studies in Central & East Asian Religions* Vol. 5/6, Copenhagen: Journal of the Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 1992-3: 208.